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ABSTRACT

Ethnocentric racism is especially evident in American schools. In educational institutions, Black children learn that schools do not like them, do not respond to them, do not appreciate their culture, and do not think they can learn. Research indicates that such attitudes are realistic. For several reasons, schools are ideal places to support and perpetuate social "superiority" and "inferiority." Nevertheless, research increasingly indicates improvement in Black students' standardized test performance and ability to achieve. Obvious factors explain why students, including Blacks and Hispanics, are higher achievers in Catholic schools than in public schools. Social issues, such as adolescent pregnancy, contribute to Black children's failure to achieve in school, and in some cases, their ability to remain in school. To address these educational and social conditions, Black families must get excited about education and demand that schools develop and implement programs that will enable their children to achieve academically. A few such programs presently exist. The special education initiative of the New York State Division for Youth and the Begin Excelling Starting Today program of the 61st Precinct Youth Council are two innovative educational programs which improve the schools for Black children. (RH)

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BLACK FAMILIES: CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

Black families are indeed challenged whenever they come face-to-face with the awesome educational establishment of the United States. Blacks and how they fare in the educational system is a subject that has been well-researched and we are sure many of you have had the occasion to peruse this research. So our discussion will be brief here. The detailed description of this problem has been well-covered by educational researchers and social scientists who have spent hours upon hours researching the issue. Nevertheless, we will spend enough time on the matter to validate the existence of an educational enigma for the Black family and to draw the parameters of this paradox. Our goal is to meet the objectives of this conference and the needs of Black families by presenting realistic options for our children's educational success.

Our primary role here today is to talk about strategies for developing effective schools in our communities. Effective schools, by our definition, are those schools that prepare our children to: (1) think for themselves; (2) believe in themselves; (3) compete equally with White students for college educations, jobs, housing and so on; and (4) live as productive members of the Black community and the American society.

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Why A Public Education System

At first, the varying factors affecting the education of the Black child in the American school system appear to be disparate phenomenon. On closer investigation, it's apparent that they are inter-related and emanate from the same source: ethnocentric racism in American society. This ethnocentricism, which promotes the superiority of the dominant group, is especially evident in the education institution. The dominant group, having created the public school concept, to ensure a free and general education for all members of the society, has developed the system to its advantage -- and that's to be expected. The question for Black families and our children is what does such a system mean for us? Potentially, it could mean a psychologically hazardous situation for Black students.

Throughout the majority of their experiences in schools, Black children learn that the schools do not like them, do not respond to them, do not appreciate their culture and do not think they can learn. This belief is maintained in the face of research which supports the premise that ethnic origin has little relationship to a child's ability to learn, upon entering school, nor how well he/she performs in school. Even the attitude of the child's mother is a more reliable predictor of performance than is ethnicity.

Some researchers and scholars (Charles D. Moody, Sr.) assert that education for the majority is designed to prepare them to perform in the high status roles assigned to them while it simultaneously equips Blacks to

perform in the low status roles assigned to them. Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond states in the Equality and Excellence Report that, "Overall, the evidence suggests that Black students are exposed to less challenging educational program offerings that are less likely to enhance development of higher-order cognitive skills and abilities than are White students."[1] Schools then have become the locus for supporting and perpetuating the "superiority" of the dominant group and the "inferiority" of the minority group (Blacks).

The school is the ideal place to carry out this task because:

- Children are required, by law, to attend school from age five to approximately age sixteen.
- Children spend thirty to forty percent of their waking hours in school.
- The school sets the standards and means by which students' aptitudes and performance are judged.
- The school instills socially acceptable patterns of behavior and decorum.[2]

Academic Considerations

There is evidence that Black children are not as successful in school as White children. Such evidence shows that:

- Seventy-two percent (72%) of Black students, as compared to eighty-three percent (83%) of White students graduate from high school.[3]
- In 1982, the difference between the median test scores of Blacks and Whites on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was 217 points,[4] with Whites scoring higher.
- The Coleman report, released in 1966, documents the fact that Black inner-city children as a group are not learning how to read. The National Assessment of Educational Progress report (1978-1980) showed that Black children continued to lag behind White children in reading achievement.[5]
- Seventy-eight percent (78%) of Black students in New York City drop out of school.[6]
- The national dropout rate for Black students declined between 1971 and 1981 from twenty-six percent (26%) to eighteen percent (18%); but the rate for fourteen to fifteen (14-15) year olds actually increased from 1.6 to 2.9%.[7]

The I.Q. test has long been proclaimed as the raison d'etre for channeling Black children to vocational or general education programs rather than academic programs in school.

These statistics reflect the performance of Black students but they do not reflect the ability of Black students to perform. The disparity between Black and White students' performance has little to do with ability. In

fact, these figures may reflect nothing more than Black childrens' disenchantment and disappointment in a system that fails to respect them or their culture. Nevertheless, there is increasing evidence in the literature that Black students' performance on standardized tests and their ability to achieve is improving.

The College Board's Equality and Excellence Report on the Educational Status of Black Americans reported that the educational performance of Black students in elementary and secondary school, as measured by standardized achievement test scores, rose in several areas between 1970 and 1980. Researchers in Achievement Growth in Public and Catholic Schools assert that catholic schools produce high achieving students, including Black and Hispanic students, even though catholic schools are generally believed to be academically inferior to public schools because of their large classes, smaller per pupil costs and more limited resources. Students are higher achievers in the catholic schools because they are placed in more academic programs, take more semesters of academic course work and receive more homework assignments. The positive effects of catholic schools are more pronounced for Black students than for White students. Even in the case of Black English and its alleged relationship to the failure of Black children in learning how to read, recent explanations focus on the school and not on the Black student.

The negative attitude of teachers towards Black English may be a contributing factor in Black childrens' failure to learn to read. Black English, which is spoken by Black inner-city children, is considered, by

some, as a deficient form of standard English. The teachers' reaction to Black English may trigger a bias in the Black student against learning standard English. Teachers' attitudes toward Black English was the focus of a 1979 court ruling in Detroit, Michigan. "The U.S. District Court of Michigan ruled in the case of King Elementary School students vs. the Ann Arbor, Michigan School District Board in 1979 that Black childrens' self-confidence and ability to learn standard English were being undermined by teachers' unconscious but evident attitudes towards the home language (Black English). The judge ordered teachers to learn more about Black English and to increase their sensitivity toward the needs of Black English-speaking students whom they teach."[8]

Social Considerations

In addition to academic issues, social issues contribute to Black childrens' failure to achieve in school and, in some cases, their ability to remain in school. Black children face problems of drug and alcohol abuse, youth unemployment, single parent families, teen pregnancies and others. One of the most widespread problems is the problem of teen pregnancy. Adolescent pregnancy is a condition that affects one million teenagers each year, and has far-reaching consequences for the adolescent, her baby and the baby's grandmother. It is estimated that four out of ten fourteen year olds will become pregnant; two out of ten will give birth and three out of twenty will have an abortion. Of those teens who give birth, it is estimated that twenty-five percent (25%) of the babies will be underweight. This is an

important factor since the high infant mortality rate associated with teen pregnancy is directly related to low birth weight.

Teenage pregnancy is particularly significant for Black teenagers because often the pregnancy represents the second or third generation of a pregnant adolescent. Most likely, the grandmother is in her late twenties or early thirties and receives AFDC.

An adolescent pregnancy reduces the quality, as well as the standard of living, of most teen mothers and their children. Joyce Ladner reports in Teenage Pregnancy: The Implications for Black America, that women who have had their first baby as a teenager can expect:

- to accumulate less work experience;
- to receive lower hourly wages;
- to earn less per year;
- to become a high school dropout; and
- to hold lower status jobs.

But the most disappointing aspect of this situation is what it means to the newborn. Traditionally, giving birth to a baby is a time of joy and hope and promise for the future. But in this case, the babies are at a decided disadvantage. Many of the young mothers are not emotionally mature themselves and cannot provide the baby with a feeling of stability, identity or self-worth. She is unable to provide the intellectual nurturing the child

will need. Many of these children will suffer from educational and cognitive deficits. Just as adolescent pregnancy results, very often, in generations of teen mothers, it also results in generations of school dropouts as well since most pregnant teens dropout of school.

Strategies

Black Families: Confronting the Challenge of Education is the only way the public schools will educate our children. Black families must get excited about the education of their children and DEMAND that schools develop and implement programs that will result in their academic achievement. In this brief statement, we have shown that the educational bureaucracy will rarely voluntarily and altruistically decide that it's time to prepare Black children for high status roles in this society. On the contrary, we have documented that schools, in fact, educate White children for such roles while they often make our children feel inferior and incapable of learning.

The literature contains examples of effective urban public schools that strive for excellence of Black children. Schools in which Black children achieve and score above the average on national standardized tests. Although there are some examples, we need to make sure there are many more. The first step in doing more is to identify the schools our children attend, determine how well our children are achieving in these schools and if action is warranted -- TAKE ACTION. We can help with locating the schools by bringing to your attention a 1984 study conducted by Charles Moody, Sr. In

this study, Mr. Moody examined the perceptions of 202 superintendents who are responsible for educating more than fifty percent (50%) of all Black students enrolled in public schools in the United States. Based on this study, Mr. Moody concluded that the majority of Black students are concentrated in less than three percent (3%) of the school districts in the United States.[9] Imagine what our future would be like if we mobilized nationally and concentrated our efforts on those school districts -- if we determined and ensured that the academic programs of those school districts would facilitate the academic achievement of our children.

Thanks to Mr. Moody, we now know where the schools that are important to our future are located. We are grateful to people like Ron Edmonds, Barbara Sizemore and others who have given us the formula for effective public schools for Black children. This formula is the second step towards completing our plan for effective urban schools. Briefly, the effective schools formula includes the following ingredients:

- A mildly authoritarian principal who believes Black children can and will learn.
- A principal who is willing to be different (i.e., differing with the system's norm of low achievement for Black, poor schools.
- A principal who can secure agreement among teachers, community and the school district that high achievement of the students is the school's highest priority.
- A principal who fosters a climate that's conducive to teaching and learning.

- A principal who establishes routines and processes that facilitate the realization of the school's highest priority.
- A principal who is willing to disagree with his superiors about the choices of his routines and their implementation.[10]

This is a wonderfully simple plan -- but one that's within our reach! All we need to achieve our goal is a little determination.

We in New York State have that determination. We are determined to improve our schools for our children. Even though, as a State agency, education is not our primary responsibility, we believe we can be instrumental in bringing to the attention of the State Education Department -- innovative educational programs. The Division for Youth currently supports two innovative program initiatives -- one in New York City (Coney Island area) and one in upstate New York (Broome County).

Innovative Educational Programs

The Special Education Initiative - NYS Division for Youth

The Special Education Initiative, conceived and funded by the NYS Division for Youth, was designed to determine if work experience of high-risk youth would improve their ability to learn and interact with others. The project trained and placed high-risk teenagers in the public schools as teacher aides. Of the twenty-five (25) youth selected, fifteen (15) were youth who had been placed with the NYS Division for Youth

through the juvenile justice system and were returning to the community and ten (10) were community youth who were behavioral problems in school. The teacher aides developed lesson plans, implemented the program and were encouraged to develop care-giving relationships with the school-aged children with them they were in contact.

Two program sites were selected and the program became operational in P.S. #36 (Community School Board #5) in Manhattan and Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in the City of Binghamton in upstate New York.

Even without a formal evaluation, which is scheduled for 1987, important information on behavioral changes exhibited by the teacher aides is being compiled.

A synopsis of this program and our findings to date are available for your review.

The 61st Precinct Youth Council: Project B.E.S.T. (Begin Excelling, Starting Today) - Coney Island, New York

The services offered through this project received pilot funding through the NYS Division for Youth. As the project evolved, funding shifted to the City of New York through its Youth Board, and more recently through the Board of Education: Division of High Schools, Offsite Education and Auxiliary Services.

A large percentage of the youth served are in serious need of quality education services. Many of the young people, in this racially-mixed community of the working poor and middle class families, are truant, school dropouts or learning disabled. One of the services offered by the BEST Project is experiencing very good success. The hold-over rate in the junior high schools is an area which has received concentrated attention from the project. During the summer of 1984 and 1985, a summer school was sponsored by the 61st Precinct Youth Program for seventh and eighth grade hold-overs. Classes were scheduled and the admittance criteria was truancy or a record of behavior problems. Attendance averaged over 90%. Followups showed a 52% improvement in attendance in school and a 64% improvement in academics. Participants who fulfilled the requirements were promoted to the next grade. Followups are done a quarterly basis during the course of the school year.

A detailed description of the 61st Precinct Youth Council's program and the community it serves is available.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Moody, Sr., Charles D., "Equity and Excellence: An Educational Imperative," in the State of Black America 1986 (New York: National Urban League, Inc. 1986) pg. 23-42.

[2]The Educational System and Black Mental Health.

[3]Ibid.

[4]"Race and How It Affects Our Everyday Life," Detroit Free Press, December 8, 1985, Section H, pp.8H and 14H.

[5]The Enigma - The Persistent Failure of Black Children in Learning to Read.

[6]Excellence and Equity: Implications for Effective Schools.

[7]Equality and Excellence Report on the Educational Status of Black Americans, published by College Board.

[8]Dummett-Leonie, "The Enigma - The Persistent Failure of Black Children in Learning to Read," Reading World, Vol. 24(1), pg. 31-37, Oct. 1984.

[9]Moody, Sr., Charles D., "Equity and Excellence: An Educational Imperative," in the State of Black America 1986 (New York: National Urban League, Inc. 1986) pg. 23-42.

[10]Jones-Wilson, Faustine C., "The State of Urban Education," in The State of Black America, 1984 (New York: National Urban League, Inc., 1984) pg. 95-112.